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Security Council

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Report of the Secretary-General on Eritrea and Ethiopia

I. Introduction

1. By paragraph 15 of its resolution 1298 (2000) of 17 May 2000, the Security Council requested me to submit to it within 15 days an initial report on compliance with paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 of the resolution and thereafter to report to it every 60 days after the date of adoption of the resolution on its implementation and on the humanitarian situation in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The present report is submitted in accordance with that request.

2. By paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 of resolution 1298 (2000), the Security Council:

> "2. *Demands* that both parties immediately cease all military action and refrain from the further use of force;
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> "3. *Demands further* that both parties withdraw their forces from military engagement and take no action that would aggravate tensions;
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> "4. *Demands* the earliest possible reconvening, without preconditions, of substantive peace talks, under OAU auspices, on the basis of the Framework Agreement and the Modalities and of the work conducted by OAU as recorded in its communiqué issued by its current Chairman of 5 May 2000 (S/2000/394), which would conclude a peaceful definitive settlement of the conflict."

II. Relevant developments

3. Proximity talks conducted under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity in Algiers from 29 April to 5 May 2000 concluded unsuccessfully, owing to disagreements between the parties over whether the Framework Agreement, the Modalities for its implementation and a ceasefire should be signed prior to the finalization of consolidated technical arrangements. On 12 May fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia resumed on three fronts, the western or Badme-Mereb front, the central or Zalambessa-Egala front and the eastern or Bure front. The fighting continued even after the adoption of resolution 1298 (2000). During the first week of the hostilities, most of the fighting was concentrated on the western front. The fighting on other fronts was apparently limited to exchanges of heavy artillery fire.

4. Prior to the adoption of resolution 1298 (2000), the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Eritrea, in a letter to me dated 15 May, communicated Eritrea's acceptance of resolution 1297 (2000), which had been adopted by the Security Council on 12 May. Following the adoption of resolution 1298 (2000), the Foreign Minister, in a letter dated 19 May to the President of the Security Council (S/2000/464), reiterated Eritrea's acceptance of paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 of that resolution and stated that Eritrea was unequivocally committed to the speedy implementation of the measures contained in them.

5. The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, in a letter to me dated 15 May, stated that Ethiopia was prepared to resume the proximity talks in Algiers. However, he stated, "the success that we might achieve at the proximity talks would lead, and must lead ... not only to a ceasefire, but to a durable peace ...".

6. By the end of the first week of the fighting, Ethiopian forces had made major advances on the western front. By 18 May, they occupied Barentu, a town in south-western Eritrea about 40 kilometres

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north of the border. Thereafter, Ethiopia further expanded areas under its control in western Eritrea.

7. In the second week of the fighting, the focus of attention shifted to the central front around Zalambessa. On 19 May, Ethiopia announced the capture of the Eritrean town of Madina, which is approximately 50 kilometres west of Mendefera, a key town on the central front behind the Eritrean defence lines at Zalambessa. By 23 May, Ethiopia claimed to have occupied some command posts on the Zalambessa front and that Eritrean forces were retreating in disarray.

8. Following the adoption of resolutions 1297 (2000) and 1298 (2000), the current Chairman of OAU, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria, on 19 May appealed to the two parties for an immediate and mutual cessation of hostilities and their participation as soon as possible in a new round of proximity talks. Declaring his readiness to organize such indirect talks immediately, the current Chairman stated that he would await urgent and positive reactions from the parties. He also informed the Council and myself that he had dispatched his Personal Envoy, Ahmed Ouyahia, to the region. From 24 to 26 May, President Bouteflika himself led the OAU efforts, shuttling between Addis Ababa and Asmara. Meanwhile, I wrote to President Bouteflika and requested him to keep me regularly informed of OAU efforts in view of my responsibility to report to the Council.

9. On 24 May, OAU issued a communiqué (see S/2000/477), in which it summarized the diplomatic efforts led by Mr. Ouyahia to encourage Eritrea and Ethiopia to take a series of steps to initiate the de-escalation of the conflict to arrive at its cessation.

10. On the same day, the Government of Eritrea announced (see S/2000/481) that, in accordance with the OAU communiqué, it had decided to redeploy its forces to positions held before 6 May 1998 and that it would begin redeployment at midnight on 25 May in the Zalambessa area. Eritrea also expressed its readiness to finalize consolidated technical arrangements and to send its delegation to the Algiers proximity talks.

11. On 25 May, Ethiopia announced that its forces had recaptured the town of Zalambessa. On the same day, the Government of Ethiopia said in a statement (S/2000/483) that the Eritrean announcement of withdrawal had come as its forces were being evicted from the Mereb-Zalambessa-Alitena front and that fierce fighting was continuing in limited areas on that front. It also claimed that large areas of territory in the eastern and north-eastern part of Ethiopia were still occupied by Eritrea and that "the war can only come to an end when Ethiopia has verified that Eritrea has removed its forces of occupation from all the remaining Ethiopian territory under their control." At the same time, Ethiopia reiterated that it had no desire to remain in Eritrean territory that it held temporarily for the purpose of military expediency. The statement also said that the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, had assured the current Chairman of OAU that Ethiopia's commitment to the peace process under OAU auspices was firm and principled.

12. Also on 25 May, Eritrea announced that, with its redeployment from the Zalambessa area, it had completed its redeployment to positions held prior to 6 May 1998 in fulfilment of its obligations under the OAU peace plan. Eritrea also expressed its commitment to redeploy from Bada and Bure after it was informed by President Bouteflika of the Ethiopian position that it should do so.

13. In his communiqué of 26 May (see S/2000/495), the current Chairman of OAU identified three points on which the two parties were committed, namely (1) to redeploy their respective forces to positions held prior to 6 May 1998, (2) to resolve their border dispute in conformity with the Framework Agreement and the Modalities, and (3) to pursue negotiations under the auspices of OAU with a view to finalizing the consolidated technical arrangements. The communiqué also noted that the current Chairman had invited the two parties to resume the proximity talks in Algiers on Monday, 29 May 2000. Welcoming the Eritrean President's decision to withdraw from the Zalambessa area and his written commitment to withdraw also from Bada and Bure, the current Chairman considered that these Eritrean initiatives taken in the context of the Modalities would lead to the rapid cessation of fighting between the parties. The communiqué further reported that the current Chairman had dispatched his Personal Envoy to Addis Ababa to inform the Prime Minister of Ethiopia of the Eritrean commitment to withdraw from Bada and Bure and Eritrea's agreement to send its delegation to Algiers on 29 May to resume the proximity talks.

14. On 26 May, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, it was reported, said that although Ethiopia

had decided to attend the proximity talks, it would not stop fighting unless it ensured the withdrawal of the Eritrean troops from all areas still under occupation. The same day, Ethiopia announced that its forces had captured Forte and Senafe and that there had been an exchange of heavy artillery fire on the Bure front while fighting at the Zalambessa-Egala front had subsided. It claimed that on the Bure front an attack by the Eritrean army, despite the Eritrean President's written promise to withdraw his army from that area immediately, had resulted in a heavy exchange of artillery. Ethiopia announced that its air force had bombed military positions at Hirgigo near Massawa and around Adi-Keieh on 28 May and the military airbase in Asmara the day after.

15. In letters addressed to me on 27 May (S/2000/498) and 29 May (S/2000/499), the Permanent Representative of Eritrea and President Isaias Afwerki respectively accused Ethiopia of continuing military action against Eritrea even after Eritrea's full compliance with the OAU proposal for redeployment of troops to pre-6 May 1998 positions, and called for condemnation of Ethiopia and its withdrawal from the occupied areas. However, in a statement of 30 May, Ethiopia claimed that while Eritrean troops had fled Bure, it had not been verified that they had vacated Bada on the north-east frontier and that it was taking urgent measures to verify if indeed Eritrean troops had withdrawn from all occupied territories in the area.

16. On 30 May, Ethiopia announced that its forces that had been controlling western Eritrea since 12 May had been withdrawn. Ethiopia reiterated that it had no interest in occupying Eritrean territory. On 31 May, Eritrea reported that fighting took place from 26 to 28 May on the Senafe front. However, on 30 May, Ethiopia had stated that there had been no fighting in the vicinity of Senafe for the preceding three days and that there was no fighting on that day on any of the fronts.

17. On 31 May, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia announced to the diplomatic community in Addis Ababa that Ethiopia had verified that all its territories had been cleared of Eritrean troops and that, Ethiopia's objective having been fulfilled, the war was over as from that day as far as Ethiopia was concerned. On the Zalambessa front, he acknowledged that the Ethiopian army was in "indisputably Eritrean territories" and declared that whether Ethiopia would "fully redeploy to the 6 May positions in the context of a peace agreement, in the context of a cessation of hostilities agreement, would depend on what the international community is prepared to provide by way of security guarantees". At the same time, he confirmed Ethiopia's instructions to its army on the western front to redeploy and those to its army on the eastern front to clear and secure "the newly liberated areas". The Prime Minister also expressed Ethiopia's willingness to have face-to-face talks with Eritrea.

18. On 1 June, the Eritrean Presidential Spokesman, it was reported, demanded that Ethiopia withdraw to the 6 May positions and said that Eritrea would not declare a ceasefire until Ethiopia had left all occupied Eritrean territory.

III. Observations

19. The capacity of the Secretariat to monitor and report on the military situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia based on its own independent observation is extremely limited. There are no United Nations observers on the ground. United Nations staff members who are working in the vicinity of the areas of conflict have no mandate or capability for such a task. From official statements by both Eritrea and Ethiopia and publicly available information, however, the broad outline of developments on the ground seems sufficiently clear.

20. Since Ethiopia's declaration of the end of the war on 31 May, no major combat has been reported. However, reports of some fighting have been received and the parties continue to accuse each other of attacks.

21. Eritrea and Ethiopia resumed proximity talks under OAU auspices in Algiers on 30 May. The talks were continuing on 2 June as the present report was being finalized.

22. Progress towards meeting the requirements of paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 of Security Council resolution 1298 (2000) has been made mainly through the diplomatic efforts of OAU. I urge the two parties to cooperate fully with OAU and other members of the international community to continue to support OAU efforts to achieve a definitive peaceful resolution of the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia without further delay. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the efforts of OAU in this regard, and particularly those of its current Chairman, and indicate that the United Nations stands ready to support these efforts as appropriate.